

True Servants of Christ: Stewards of God's Mysteries and Scum of the Earth

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[0 : 00] Well, do turn, if you would, to that passage that we read in 1 Corinthians chapter 4, page 953 in the Visitor's Bibles. Stewards of God's mysteries or scum of the earth, which of those would you rather be seen to be as a leader in Christ's church?

At whatever level, whether you're called to a congregational leadership or whether it's some kind of national leadership, whether it's leading small groups in the congregation of Christian people, whether it's in your school SU group, or your university Christian union, or wherever it might be.

Stewards of God's mysteries or just the scum of the earth? Of course, none of us is likely to aspire to be regarded as the scum of the earth.

Who would? A steward, a trusted senior official holding the keys of all your master's resources? Well, yes, indeed. And the responsibility to equip the master's people to do the master's work?

Well, who wouldn't want such an honour? But, you see, what Paul teaches us here in this remarkable chapter, that has so much to tell us about genuine Christian leadership, what he teaches us is that you can't be one without at the same time being the other as well.

[1 : 37] The apostle himself is absolutely plain. We see it in verse 1. He says, we are servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. But look at verse 13.

We have become, he says, and still are like the scum of the world, like the refuse of all things. And if you, friends, are going to be genuine servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, stewarding the glorious mysteries of his message in our world, then that is what you are always going to be seen to be as, as well.

Scum. Refuse. Dirt. Dirt that our society would rather cleanse itself of and wipe away as you wipe dog dirt off your shoe.

That's what Paul's saying. And I think that in days to come we're going to discover that more and more in ways that are very personal and perhaps in ways that are very painful.

And so there's never been a time when it's more important for us to know what the true servants of Jesus Christ look like and sound like and are treated like in the world.

[2 : 52] So that we're able to tell the difference between genuine ministry and that which is bogus. Between the true Christian leader and the true Christian church and that which is false.

And that's what Paul's teaching us in this chapter that's before us this morning in his first letter to the Corinthian church. It's a chapter that I've turned to this week myself for help and direction and encouragement to help me in my own particular leadership responsibilities.

I think it's a message of great help for all of us as a fellowship at this time because God has placed great responsibilities on all of us in these days of crisis in our own denomination, in our church.

So I want to direct our thoughts this morning to Paul's teaching on what we are to expect if we are true servants of Jesus Christ and how we are to recognize that true servant leadership in his church today.

First of all though, we need to give a bit of thought to the context. Contrary to what some people like to say of us as evangelical Christians, we don't just go to the Bible and pull out proof texts and use them carelessly.

[4 : 03] We of all people take great care to read the Bible intelligently. You can't just dive into your Bible blind just as you don't jump off a rock straight into the sea. You examine carefully first what's underneath the surface.

Well, that's what we must do here. Paul's not writing directly to us, is he? He's writing to the church in Corinth in the year 55 AD. It's a long time ago. We must never forget that.

But of course we must never forget that God has also chosen to preserve this letter in the Scriptures for us. So also there must be a message for us today as well. And indeed there is. It is a very powerful one.

We should hardly be surprised at that because human nature at its basic level hasn't changed very much in the last 2,000 years. In fact, it hasn't changed very much in the last 10,000 years.

And nor, therefore, have the issues that are facing the church, at least in their essence. What then was this group of Christians like to whom Paul is writing this letter?

[5 : 05] Well, if you look at chapter 1, verses 1 and 2, Paul tells us that they were people called out of a pagan world, out of an aggressively hedonistic society, but called from that, he says, to be saints.

That is, to be holy, to be distinct and different. Like those, he says, in all places who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Second, it was a highly gifted church, as Paul goes on to say in verses 4 to 7 of chapter 1.

You're not lacking in any spiritual gifts, he says. But, if you look down to verse 10 of chapter 1, you'll see that they were, in fact, a divided church.

There was quarrelling among them. There was a spirit of petty partisanship. There were groups that had their own guru and they were fighting each other as to whose was best.

Why? Why were they doing that? Well, because, Paul says, they were immature. Immature Christians and an immature church. And that spirit of immaturity and the consequences that it brought in the church in Corinth pervades the whole letter.

[6 : 17] We haven't got time to read it all through, but just look at chapter 3, verses 1 to 3. Paul says, I, brothers, couldn't address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you weren't ready for it. Even now you're not ready, for you're still of the flesh. For while there's jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and only behaving in a human way.

Just like the rest of the world, in other words. Not like the church. Well, that's hardly unique to Corinth, of course. It's pretty common everywhere in the church of Jesus Christ today.

And it's because they were still living in the world's valuations of things. All sorts of things. Their thinking was wrong because they thought like the world, in a whole host of different ways.

One of their ways of wrong thinking, it just happens to be, was in the matter of sexual holiness. And chapter 5 tells us plainly that there was great immorality among them, even immorality not tolerated among the pagans.

[7 : 24] A man was sleeping with his father's wife. I'm glad to say as yet, we haven't endorsed incest in our own denomination today, but who knows, it might be the very next thing. And just listen to what Paul says in chapter 5, verse 2.

And you are arrogant, he says, about this situation. Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

See, Paul's saying it's right at times. In fact, it's essential to discriminate clearly, to judge between what's right and what is wrong. People love to tell us today, don't they?

Never judge anything in the Christian church. Well, Paul says you've got to judge. Look down to chapter 5, verse 9. I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.

Not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. Since then, you would need to go out of the world. He's not saying remove yourself from society. But, he says, I'm writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother, that is a Christian, if he's guilty of sexual immorality, or greed, or is an idolater, or a vile, or drunkard, or a swindler.

[8 : 35] Not even to eat with such a one. What have I to do with judging outsiders, the pagans? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?

God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you. Stop thinking like the world, he says. That's a mark of real immaturity in the Christian church.

It's not a mark of sophistication to live and to speak and to act as they do. It's a very salutary word for our churches today, isn't it? Similarly, how to tackle their immaturity about how they're to behave when they met together as a Christian family.

And as you know, chapters 11 to 14 are full of instruction about how to be more mature, how to be less childish in their corporate worship. And again, that's a matter of great importance today. But here in these early chapters, the first three or four chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul's focus is on how to judge what is true and genuine Christian ministry and what is not.

And what is the true and genuine Christian message and what is not. And in chapters 1 and 2, the real issue is how to recognize real wisdom and real power.

[9 : 53] The Corinthians, you see, like so many in the church today, were very taken up with what the world outside values so very highly. They were taken up with impressive speeches, with great eloquence, with rhetoric, with all kinds of fancy words and fancy ways and so on, with figures who were very personally impressive people, much more impressive than Paul himself had been.

And therefore, apparently, much more powerful, much more exciting, much more impressive to outsiders. Now, we can understand that, can't we? Because, as a church, we want to impact the world outside.

And quite understandably, we feel ourselves so often to be weak, to be inadequate. We can understand how that church in Corinth must have felt. You've been to the British Museum and if you've seen some of the artifacts from these great cities of the ancient world, the great pillars of their temples, the magnificence of their architecture, you can see what a highly sophisticated society it was.

And here was this little group of unimpressive people just with a book in their hand teaching people the Bible. It seemed so utterly unimpressive. And they, like we often do, had a crisis of confidence in their own ability.

Chapter 1, verse 26, tells us that not many of them were impressive in that way. Not many of them, says Paul, were wise. Not many of them were of noble birth. They weren't the big figures of the day.

[11 : 26] I guess that's the same today. Our church this morning, we're pretty much full of ordinary people, aren't we? We're not that impressive looking to the outside world and a world that's obsessed with celebrity and all of these things.

It's very tempting to think to ourselves that if we're to appeal to the world outside, if we're to impress it, then we need all kinds of special things to get their attention. We need all kinds of special power if we're going to make impact today.

We need the dazzling speakers, the great debaters, the people who can take on. Well, I suppose the Richard Dawkinses, people like that. Thank God there are people who are greatly gifted and able to take them on and to help us, but not that many.

Or we can feel that we need the big names, the powerful people, the impressive ones, the influential people in the media, the newspapers, the TV. It's very easy to think, but to make an impact for Jesus Christ today, we need more, more than just this basic, simple gospel about Jesus Christ.

It seems so feeble, so foolish, so weak, so passe in our post-modern sophisticated world. But look at chapter 1 verses 27 and 28.

[12 : 53] It says Paul, but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.

Three times, you see, Paul says, no, that's wrong. God chose precisely this way of weakness. He chose what is foolish in the eyes of the world.

He chose what is weak. He chose what is low and despised in this world to build his kingdom. It's God's fault. In fact, it's God's deliberate plan.

Why? Verse 29, says Paul, so that no human being should boast and think that it's them that is building the church of Jesus Christ.

God is subversive. His way is to shame the wise by what appears to them at first to be so foolish. That is his power. That is his real saving power, says Paul.

[14 : 00] It's the word of the cross. As verse 18 of chapter 1 says, it's foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those being saved it is the power of God. And see, the great challenge, the great question that Paul is issuing to the church in Corinth and to us today in the church in Scotland is this.

Do you have confidence for evangelism, for growth, for mission in a pagan culture, in a culture and world bent on the pursuit of hedonistic pleasure of all kinds, material and sexual, in a culture bent on the denial of the truth of God?

Do you have confidence in the foolishness and the weakness and the despised nature of God's message of power, of God's method of ministry, of setting that power to work?

Do you really have confidence in that? If we do, says Paul, then we are following the way of genuine apostolic Christianity. But if we don't, then we also are like the Corinthians.

We're immature. And worse, in fact, we are departing from the genuine apostolic faith and the genuine apostolic way. Do we have confidence in the foolishness of the gospel of Jesus?

[15 : 28] That's a big question, isn't it? But that is the question facing so many of us in the church today. And it's vitally important for us and for any congregation that's called to be standing and giving a lead and being a witness in the situation we face in our churches today.

Because insults will fly and they already are flying. And criticism will abound. And you and I will begin to question whether we're doing the right thing after all. And it'll look to us that others are getting a far, far better reputation and indeed are being feted by their so-called noble concerns for the peace of the church.

While people like us and people like your minister in particular will be treated as wreckers and irritants who have no care for our church and even as scum.

that's why Paul gives such a clear contrast to us here in 1 Corinthians chapter 4 between genuine Christian leadership and the apostolic pattern and that which may seem to be so impressive and so desirable and so lauded by the world but in fact is departing from the true way of Jesus Christ completely.

That's why I want to look briefly at chapter 4 this morning just to highlight the major themes and to show us clearly that the true servant of Jesus Christ will always be the one who is faithful to the word of the cross and faithful at the same time to the way of the cross.

[17 : 09] Look at verse 2 of chapter 4 It is required of stewards says Paul that they be found trustworthy. What does that mean?

three things that they suggest. First, real Christian leaders and churches are servants faithful always to the word of the cross.

Verses 1 to 5 point us to the genuine message that is the heart of all true Christian leadership and servanthood. The heart of genuine Christian leadership of any kind is that it imitates that of Paul and the other apostles.

As he says down in verse 16 be imitators of me. Not being arrogant he's saying be a genuine apostolic follower. A genuine ministry he says in verse 1 serves Christ.

We are servants of Christ and it faithfully stewards the mysteries of God. That is a faithful servant is faithful to Christ himself the revealer and is faithful to Christ's once for all revelation his gospel.

[18 : 25] The mysteries of God. What are the mysteries of God? Well back in chapter 2 verses 1 and 2 he tells us very very plainly. He says in verse 1 when I came to you brothers I did not come proclaiming to you this testimony of God or you'll see as the footnote says this mystery of God with lofty speeches and so on.

What is that mystery of God? That testimony of verse 2 I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. That's the mystery of God.

It's the same down in chapter 2 verse 7 we impart he says a secret and hidden wisdom of God which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

It's eternal. Verse 9 it's written what no eye has seen nor ear heard nor the heart of man imagined what God has prepared for those who love him these things God has revealed to us that is the apostles through his spirit.

These things the mysteries of God the gospel of the cross of Jesus Christ God has revealed and that is the genuine apostolic gospel.

[19 : 44] you see that is precisely the problem for the people in Corinth. That seemed to be such a weak thing in the world of the Corinthian believers just as it seems such a weak thing in our world today.

That's a thing that is scorned and despised by the media by the intelligentsia of a skeptical age. Does that same message still cut any mustard today in our postmodern generation?

No! Is the answer of many in the church. We need to change. We need to move with the times. We need to have a different emphasis because our world is now so clever, so sophisticated.

Well, that is not a new attitude, friends. That is precisely the attitude that was found in the church in Corinth in 55 AD, 2,000 years ago. The gospel of the cross, says Paul in chapter 1, verse 23, was a stumbling block from the start for Jews, for religious people.

And it was foolishness, he says, for the Greek intellect, for the secular man. But that message, said Paul, nevertheless, was the power of God for salvation. It was the only way that people were saved to Jesus Christ in Corinth.

[20 : 59] It's the only way that people were saved for Jesus Christ today. But you see, it's so unimpressive to the world. No one seems to see it.

Nobody thinks it's impressive when they come into this church and they just look around at ordinary people. But they don't know the transformation of power that has happened in the lives of so many of those here in this congregation this morning, and which I could recite to you.

Nobody sees that. sometimes they see very feeble and pathetic people still struggling with all kinds of difficulties and hardships in our lives. But the day that the Lord Jesus Christ appears, all of that will be seen for what it is, a truly miraculous transformation for all eternity of the hearts and lives of human beings that were marred and vitiated and crippled by the curse of sin.

And one day he says in verse 5 of chapter 4, all the heavens will see it, all the hidden things will be gloriously exposed. But you see the problem is people don't want to wait for that day, they want to look now and see and make their own judgment.

And that was a huge issue in Corinth, just as it is today. Quite naturally we want it all now, we don't want to wait for Christ coming to see the proof of the pudding, do we? I suddenly find myself wishing I could see all of these things now, but now is not that time, that's what Paul means in verses 3 to 5.

[22 : 36] He says, it doesn't matter to me to be judged by you or any human court, I don't even judge myself. When's the proper time? He says in verse 5, when the Lord comes who will bring to light all things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purpose of the heart, then each one will receive his commendation from God.

There will be a day when all that is presently hidden will be revealed to everyone, but that is when the Lord comes. That's not now. Now is the time, says Paul, for being faithful stewards of the true gospel of Christ, whatever the world thinks, and however lacking that may seem to be, even to us in the church today.

Our ministry and our witness, all of us, because all of us are Christian leaders of one kind or another, it isn't to be judged by what you can see now, simply to be faithful to the genuine gospel of the cross.

That's very, very hard. And on the one hand, that seems to be so unimpressive to the world, and sometimes even unimpressive to us, and moreover, when it is despised by the world, and even by the worldly church.

We want to see something that we can see. Last week, we had the painters at the mans, they were painting the outside windows and so on. I looked out of my study window and watched them and thought, if only I could be a painter.

[24 : 06] Because you start with something that's horrible and messy, and after the end of a week of preparation and painting, it looks wonderful and spanking you, and you can say to yourself with great satisfaction, I've done a good job well.

You see, in Christian ministry, and in all of our Christian lives, we don't have that, do we? Not until the day when the Lord Jesus comes. God is gracious, yes he is.

He gives us often glimpses that keep us going until that day. But the mark of real, true Christian ministry and Christian servants is that they are faithful nevertheless to the true word of the cross.

They are content to wait for the day of God's commendation. Not obsessed with the judgment of others now, either inside or outside the church of Jesus Christ.

That's very hard. Although at the same time, it's liberating. To be liberated from the judgments of others, we don't have to be crowd pleasers.

[25 : 13] To be liberated even from our own judgment means that we don't have to be cast down all the time with low sense of self-esteem because we see nothing. No, real Christian leaders and real Christian churches are servants faithful to the word of the cross, no matter what the world outside thinks.

But it's not just the genuine message that we'll be tempted to lose trust in, it's the genuine apostolic method that we'll naturally shrink from. Perhaps that's even more important and that's why in verses 6 to 13, Paul clearly shows us secondly that real Christian leaders and churches are servants, faithful not only to the word of the cross but also to the will of the cross.

The real apostolic pattern is not just to have a genuine message but it is to have a genuine ministry and a genuine method of ministry. See the commonest thing all the way through the history of the church is for movements to rise that claim that they have at last found more, more power, more wonderful power from God, more fulfilment, more sense of the heavenly at work in our lives, the full gospel fellowship of one kind or another, new ways of power or holiness, new ways of having influence in our culture.

Now it's natural for that to happen because every one of us as human beings is pried by nature, it's our disposition. and also every one of us is naturally averse to struggle and to suffering.

And therefore it's so easy for us to combine both of those things and to find a way of spiritual experience that ends all of our struggles and that lets us feel that we've got the real secret of victory in the Christian life and in the Christian church.

[27 : 07] We'd all love that. Of course we would. And that's taken many different forms and still does today in the Christian church. One form is that people think that they have found power to give liberation from all sickness and in health and they can have health and prosperity and healing all the way.

Another form is just the same thing, differently. People find they have been granted liberation from all their sexual struggles perhaps and find affirmation from God of a new and a better way that leaves them at liberty and without any more struggles.

So attractive, isn't it, to think that we can find that great peace and power. And that's why Paul says in verse 6, he has to rebuke them and say, don't go beyond what is written.

I've applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written and that none of you may be puffed up in favour of one against the other.

what he's saying is you can't advance beyond what is written, beyond the genuine revelation of the gospel of Christ through the apostles, the gospel of the cross, the gospel which is the way of foolishness and weakness.

[28 : 29] To think that you can do that, says Paul, is sheer arrogance, it's pride, it's to be puffed up. So verse 7, he says, who do you think you are, boasting as if you're so special?

Look at verse 8 carefully, it's very, very revealing. Tells us that they were really abandoning the gospel of the cross and why? It's because they were abandoning the way of the cross, the way of self denial, the way of following Jesus, the way of suffering for Jesus.

They wanted to abandon all of that to reign in glory now, not just when Jesus comes. And those two things are always absolutely interlinked in the New Testament.

You abandon the gospel of the cross because you're abandoning in your own life the way of the cross. It's just what we're seeing in our studies in 2 Peter.

People abandon the truth of scripture about the way we are to live in lives of integrity and especially in lives of sexual restraint. They abandon that gospel because that is how they want to behave.

[29 : 40] And so they mold and shape the word of God to suit the way of life that they want to live. And verse 8 tells us, you see, that the Corinthians wanted it all now and they thought they had it all now.

They thought they had heaven now. They were ruling as kings, Paul says. Already you have all you want. You've arrived. Already you've become rich.

Without us, the apostles, you have become kings reigning. And would that you did reign so that we might share the rule with you. You see what Paul is saying?

The only way you have got to that way of thinking is by abandoning the true apostolic gospel. Look at verse 9.

What a total and utter contrast to that. Victorious, exalted, triumphalism. It shows the way of the true trustworthy servant.

[30 : 39] We, says Paul, we, the apostles of Jesus Christ, we don't reign like kings in glorious freedom. We are fools for Christ's sake, he says, in the world.

In the world, you are wise, you are strong, you are held in honor. You are the people being lauded in the media. The columnists and the TV commentators think you're marvelous.

But we, apostles, we are fools. We are weak. We are in disrepute in the eyes of the world. We are scorned in the newspapers.

We are abused. We are derided for what we say. Notice what he says in verse 11. To this present hour, we are hungry and homeless and hard at work.

Verse 13, do you see? We have become and still are the scum of the world, the refuse, the off-scourings of all things. Now, what is Paul saying?

[31 : 42] He's asking the question, which of these is genuine apostolic Christianity? That's the question. To the world, of course, there is no doubt at all.

Who is it that you hear on the radio and the television and in the newspapers representing the Christian church all the time, but very especially over these last couple of weeks of our General Assembly in the Church of Scotland?

Almost always, indeed I would say without exception, it is those who appear wise and honored and strong in the eyes of the world, but it is those who have abandoned the gospel of the Apostle Paul.

These are the ones who are successful and modern and progressive and wonderful in the eyes of the world. The true biblical gospel of the Apostles?

Well, you'd be very lucky to read it or hear it at all. You see Paul's point? Who is the genuine Christian leader? Who is the true servant of Jesus Christ?

[32 : 50] The faithful steward of God's mysteries? The faithful steward of the true word of the cross? Well, if we believe Paul, the Apostle of Christ, then it's not the Christian leaders who are beloved of the pagan secular columnists or of the world or of society or of the popular church.

It's very unlikely to be those in the fancy robes of preferment who have been made bishops or queen's chaplains, the ex-moderators, or those who stand up in the assembly and regale the assembly with tales of filth and get rapturous applause and smiles.

No, says Paul, it's not actually these people. It is the one who is sneered at and scorned and looks to all the eyes of the world just like the scum of the earth.

That's the true steward of the mysteries of God in Christ. Friends, it's very, very important for you to all understand that.

For all of us who are leaders in any capacity in the church, as I've said, and nearly all of us are in one capacity or another, especially for those of us who are called to particular stands in the public eye.

[34 : 13] It's very, very hard. And let me say this, it's especially hard for wives of those who are called to take a particular stand because a man can perhaps stand being the scum of the earth, but it's very, very hard for his wife to see him being regarded as the scum of the earth.

But Paul says that is the true Christian servant and stewards of the mysteries of God's grace. And it's so important in our own context to see that.

Our shrinking denomination with all its problems is so taken up with how to shore up numbers to be more relevant, to get people through the doors of our failing and fading churches.

So much thinking on how to make our church attractive and better. Listen to what Paul says. Be clear. This message of the true Christ and this way of the true church won't ever be fettered and acceptable like that in the pagan world outside.

And yet, as Paul says elsewhere in his second letter, what is the stench of death to so many is at the same time the fragrance of life to those who are being saved.

[35 : 41] but so that no human being should boast that it's ever their power and their prowess which is building Christ's church, God chooses for that fragrance of life to be made manifest through the ministry of servants who are faithful to the word of the cross while walking also in the way of the cross like Paul did.

Look at those verses 9 to 13 again. There are people looking to the world, he says, like people sentenced to death and sometimes feeling like it too. A spectacle to the world full of criticism and mockery in the world and I suppose in the world wide web these days too.

It will be people who are called fools for Christ's sake who will be held in disrepute, who will be buffeted, he says, who will be weary from the labour of their hands. People who have become and who still are like the scum of the earth, like the refuse of all things.

And yet, blessing when they're reviled and enduring when they're persecuted and treating when they are slandered and faithfully and truly stewarding the mysteries of God, not going beyond what is written in scripture but proclaiming gladly the gospel of the cross that calls all to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow the Lord Jesus Christ in the way of everlasting life.

That's the way, says Paul, of the true servants of the true church of Christ. There's one more thing in verses 14 to 21. He tells us that true Christian leaders and churches are servants faithful also to the warnings of the cross.

[37 : 19] In this last section, Paul calls us all with the Corinthians back to the genuine measure, to the yardstick of all true Christian life and witness. He warns them to be solid in following both the apostolic method and ministry and message and message always because that is the measure by which all true Christian leaders and Christian churches must be judged.

Verse 16, be imitators of me. There's nothing arrogant in that. Don't be mistaken. In any case, later on in verse 11, in chapter 11, Paul says the same thing and says, be imitators of me as I imitate Christ.

What he's saying is be genuinely apostolic in your message and in your ministry. Be apostolic in the genuine word of your gospel and also in the genuine way in which you carry it out.

See, the real issue is that they were abandoning Paul and his true authority. As he says, the authority to teach in all the churches everywhere. And that's just what's happening today all over the western world and in our denomination.

You hear it, people say, we follow Jesus, not Paul. Or we believe the gospels, we don't believe Paul. I mean, when people say that, you wonder if they've ever read the gospels. But no, says Paul, Jesus himself gave Paul authority as the apostle to the Gentiles.

[38 : 47] Verse 15, he says, he was like a father to the church, he brought them to birth. And like any father, he must direct words to them clearly about the way of faith and holiness in a pagan world.

Just like any good father today will have to say many things to his children that are hard, that perhaps at first they don't want to hear, but that must be heard. And it's the only way, says Paul, if they're to avoid harm and corruption.

And he doesn't flinch, and he warns this church not to depart from the apostolic authority. He says at verse 14, not to make them ashamed, not to destroy them, but to admonish them, to warn them, to bring them round as beloved children, to restore them.

And just so, every Christian leader, every Christian person in church must be a servant prepared to warn, to admonish, to seek to bring people back to the apostolic word of the authority of Scripture.

Scripture. Well, today as well, as Paul says in verse 18, some are arrogant. They've set Paul aside, it's irrelevant, they've moved on.

[40 : 01] But Paul says the reality is such people have no spiritual power. There's lots of talk that's well received by the world, that's latched onto, and it's so acceptable to our world.

But notice verse 20. The kingdom of God is not about talk, says Paul, it's about power. Not endless talk about how the church can be more popular or more relevant, but the power of the true gospel of the cross.

And that gospel alone to transform and change and to liberate human beings, to bring them into the full salvation they can know from the guilt and the power of twistedness of sin.

And that's the gospel that built the church in Corinth. That's the gospel that built the church in Scotland. It's the only gospel that changes lives and builds the church of Jesus Christ today.

The empty nothingness of the emasculated and acceptable words that our cultures will approve of and that our columnists will welcome. A gospel that denies the truth that the world so hates the truth about sin.

[41 : 15] A gospel that abandons the foolishness of the cross and its scandal as an atonement for sin, as an escape from the wrath of God. A gospel that demands no repentance, that offers no change.

That kind of talk, friends, may impress the world. God's power, but the only power of God is very, very different.

That kind of gospel can only have power to do one thing, to change the church into the world and therefore destroy the church. So the faithful Christian leader and the faithful Christian church will always be calling people back to the apostles' words and to the apostles' ways.

Because that's the true measure by which any and every church is to be judged. But that is painful and it's very unpopular.

It was then, it is today, and it always will be. Jesus warned us that too. Woe to you, he said, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did speak of the false prophets.

[42 : 35] Who wants to be a Christian leader today? Who wants to stand as a true Christian confessing church today? There will be real pain.

That's what we do. We are still like the scum of the earth, says Paul. But there is real privilege too to be stewards of the glorious gospel of Christ by which alone the power of God for salvation is at work in this world.

And it's a thrill to be part of that. Isn't it? Even today? Even today in our world with all its mess, with all its sin, with all its chaos, isn't it a thrill to be stewards of the mysteries of God?

I think there's reward enough even today to take all of those slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. But do not forget verse 5.

And I'll leave that with you. Do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

[43 : 53] Then, each one will receive his commendation from God. Let's pray.

Lord, we ask that you would focus our eyes and the eyes of our hearts upon that great and glorious day. And so, keep us faithful to your word and to your ways in this church and in this generation.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. O God, for whose coming is the name of God. Amen. Amen. Amen.